ANA's

# Principles for Social Networking and the Nurse

## Guidance for Registered Nurses

AMERICAN NURSES ASSOCIATION

Silver Spring, Maryland
2011

# Summary

Online social networking facilitates collegial communication among registered nurses and provides convenient and timely forums for professional development and education. It also presents remarkable potential for public education and health guidance, contributing to nursing's online professional presence. At the same time, the inherent nature of social networking invites the sharing of personal information or work experiences that may reflect poorly on a nurse's professionalism. *ANA's Principles for Social Networking and the Nurse* provides guidance to registered nurses on using social networking media in a way that protects patients' privacy and confidentiality and maintains the standards of professional nursing practice. These six essential principles are relevant to all registered nurses and nursing students across all roles and settings.

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Published by:
nursesbooks.org
THE PUBLISHING PROGRAM OF ANA

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ISBN-13: 978-1-55810-426-6 Published September 2011

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# Overview of Social Networking in Nursing

## Overview of Social Networking in Nursing

Social networks and the Internet provide unparalleled opportunities for rapid knowledge exchange and dissemination among many people. Nurses and nursing students (referred to collectively as "nurses") have a professional obligation to understand the nature, benefits, and consequences of participating in social networking of all types. Such benefits include an opportunity for broad dissemination and discussion of nursing and health-related education, research, evidence-based practice, and communication. Nurses separated by geography or other factors have the opportunity to interact with, and learn from, their colleagues. Social networking can nurture relationships and mentoring among developing professionals and can provide a forum for collegial interchange and the development of an online professional presence. It also offers the profession a vehicle for educating the public on many nursing and public health matters in a changing and dynamic healthcare system. Nursing must have a professional presence and be visible online.

At the same time, information contained on a social network has the capacity to propagate itself, taking on a life of its own in cyberspace. Inaccuracies become "fact" by mere repetition, creating confusion that is particularly dangerous in discussions regarding the public's health needs. Nurses must be aware that social networking venues are shared by their patients and colleagues. Unintended consequences of a nurse's poor judgment can breach a patient's privacy, damage a patient's trust in the individual nurse and the profession, and further damage a nurse's professional and personal future. Employers and educational institutions may also monitor social networking sites and make judgments—positive or negative—about a nurse's professional suitability. Sharing patient information, even with names removed, may be enough to trigger a HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) violation and its associated penalties.

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Patient privacy is a fundamental ethical and legal obligation of nurses. Nurses must observe standards of patient privacy and confidentiality at all times and in all environments, including online. The nurse's primary commitment is to the patient, and nurses are ethically required to practice with compassion and respect for the inherent dignity and worth of every individual. Despite the common perception that personal comments, videos, photos, or other online materials are short-lived or confined to a designated group of viewers, the nature of the Internet is that such materials are public and permanent. Just about anyone can, with a little effort, view these postings. Thus, although nurses certainly deserve a life apart from their professional duties, it is essential to understand that one's conduct on social networks is a public act that can be scrutinized and judged in the same way as any other public act.

Because social networking offers the potential for both positive and negative consequences, nurses should consider a number of principles when functioning within the virtual world of social media in order to maintain their own reputation and that of nursing as the most trusted profession.

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# Principles for Social Networking

## Principles for Social Networking

1. Nurses must not transmit or place online individually identifiable patient information. Nurses must know their legal and ethical responsibilities, as well as their own organization's policies, regarding their responsibility to protect patient privacy, whether online or offline. Merely removing someone's name (or face, in the instance of images) from a communication does not necessarily protect that person's identity. Under federal law (HIPAA), protected "individually identifiable information" includes health information that identifies the individual *or can reasonably be used* to identify the individual, in any form (oral, written, or otherwise) that relates to the past, present, or future physical or mental health of an individual.

2. Nurses who interact with patients on social media must observe ethically prescribed patient–nurse professional boundaries. The precepts guiding nurses in these matters are no different online than in person.

3. Nurses should evaluate all their postings with the understanding that a patient, colleague, educational institution, or employer could potentially view those postings. Online content and behavior has the potential to either enhance or undermine not only the individual nurse's career, but also the nursing profession.

4. Nurses should take advantage of privacy settings available on many social networking sites in their personal online activities and seek to separate their online personal and professional sites and information. Use of privacy settings and separation of personal and professional information online does not guarantee, however, that information will not be repeated in less protected forums.

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5. As the patient's advocate, nurses have an ethical obligation to take appropriate action regarding instances of questionable healthcare delivery at an individual or systems level that reflect incompetent, unethical, illegal, or impaired practice. Nurses who view social media content posted by a colleague that violates ethical or legal standards should first bring the questionable content to the attention of the colleague so that the individual can take appropriate action.

   If the posting could threaten a patient's health, welfare, or right to privacy regarding health information, the nurse has the obligation to report the matter to a supervisor or designated person within the institution or entity for follow-up. If the questionable practice is not addressed in the employment setting and seriously jeopardizes the patient's safety and well-being, the nurse may need to report the problem to external authorities. Accurate reporting and factual documentation—not merely opinion—should always support such responsible actions.

6. Nurses are encouraged to participate in the development of policies and procedures in their institutions and organizations for handling reports of online conduct that may raise legal concerns or be professionally unethical. Such official channels can protect the rights of those participating and can offer remedial action for the patient, while offering fairness, support, and nonpunitive correction and training for a nurse's inadvertent mistakes.

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# Foundation for the Principles for Social Networking

## Foundation for the Principles for Social Networking

The 2010 House of Delegates of the American Nurses Association (ANA) resolved to support the application of ANA's foundational documents to the use of social media: *Code of Ethics for Nurses with Interpretive Statements* (2001), *Nursing: Scope and Standards of Practice, 2nd Edition* (2010), and *Nursing's Social Policy Statement: The Essence of the Profession* (2010). (In addition to relying on these three documents, *ANA's Principles for Social Networking and the Nurse* also reflects current literature, statutory and regulatory requirements, other professions' guidelines, and media coverage of health professionals and social networking.)

The following provisions from these foundational documents form the basis for *ANA's Principles for Social Networking and the Nurse.*

### Code of Ethics for Nurses with Interpretive Statements (ANA, 2001)

The Code of Ethics for Nurses is a seminal ANA document establishing ethical standards for the nursing profession. It provides a framework for nurses to use in ethical analysis and decision-making. Each of the nine provisions of the Code, along with selected Interpretive Statements, provides guidance on the application of professional values and personal judgment in nurses' use of social networking and media.

***Provision 1***. "The nurse, in all professional relationships, practices with compassion and respect for the inherent dignity, worth, and uniqueness of every individual, unrestricted by considerations of social or economic status, personal attributes, or the nature of the health problem." (pg. 11)

- *Interpretive Statement 1.5 Relationships with Colleagues and Others*

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***Provision 2.*** "The nurse's primary commitment is to the patient, whether an individual, family, group, or community." (pg. 14)

- *Interpretive Statement 2.2 Conflict of Interest for Nurses*
- *Interpretive Statement 2.3 Collaboration*
- *Interpretive Statement 2.4 Professional Boundaries*

***Provision 3.*** "The nurse promotes, advocates for, and strives to protect the health, safety, and rights of the patient." (pg. 16)

- *Interpretive Statement 3.1 Privacy*
- *Interpretive Statement 3.2 Confidentiality*
- *Interpretive Statement 3.5 Acting on Questionable Practice*

***Provision 4.*** "The nurse is responsible and accountable for individual nursing practice and determines the appropriate delegation of tasks consistent with the nurse's obligation to provide optimum patient care." (pg. 21)

- *Interpretive Statement 4.2 Accountability for Nursing Judgment and Action*

***Provision 5.*** "The nurse owes the same duties to self as to others, including the responsibility to preserve integrity and safety, to maintain competence, and to continue personal and professional growth." (pg. 23)

- *Interpretive Statement 5.1 Moral Self-Respect*
- *Interpretive Statement 5.3 Wholeness of Character*
- *Interpretive Statement 5.4 Preservation of Integrity*

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***Provision 6.*** "The nurse participates in establishing, maintaining, and improving healthcare environments and conditions of employment conducive to the provision of quality health care and consistent with the values of the profession through individual and collective action." (pg. 25)

- *Interpretive Statement 6.1 Influence of the Environment on Moral Virtues and Values*
- *Interpretive Statement 6.2 Influence of the Environment on Ethical Obligations*
- *Interpretive Statement 6.3 Responsibility for the Healthcare Environment*

***Provisions 7, 8, and 9.*** These provisions generally apply to knowledge dissemination capabilities of social media and nursing's role in voicing the profession's values.

- *Provision 7.* "The nurse participates in the advancement of the profession through contributions to practice, education, administration, and knowledge development." (pg. 27)
- *Provision 8.* "The nurse collaborates with other health professionals and the public in promoting community, national, and international efforts to meet health needs." (pg. 28)
- *Provision 9.* "The profession of nursing, as represented by associations and their members, is responsible for articulating nursing values, for maintaining the integrity of the profession and its practice, and for shaping social policy." (pg. 29)

*Code of Ethics for Nurses with Interpretive Statements* is available online:

http://nursingworld.org/MainMenuCategories/EthicsStandards/CodeofEthicsforNurses/Code-of-Ethics.aspx

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### Nursing: Scope and Standards of Practice, 2nd Edition (ANA, 2010)

This foundational document outlines the expectations of the professional role of the registered nurse, presenting the scope of practice and standards of professional nursing practice and their accompanying competencies. Forty-six nursing organizations have formally endorsed *Nursing: Scope and Standards of Practice, 2nd Edition.* Several standards and their associated competencies provide guidance regarding the profession's expectations for professionalism as it relates to nurses' use of social media and networking.

- ***Standard 7. Ethics.*** "The registered nurse practices ethically." (pg. 47)
- ***Standard 8. Education.*** "The registered nurse attains knowledge and competence that reflects current nursing practice." (pg. 49)
- ***Standard 11. Communication.*** "The registered nurse communicates effectively in a variety of formats in all areas of practice." (pg. 54)
- ***Standard 12. Leadership.*** "The registered nurse demonstrates leadership in the professional practice setting and profession." (pg. 55)
- ***Standard 13. Collaboration.*** "The registered nurse collaborates with the healthcare consumer, family, and others in the conduct of nursing practice." (pg. 57)

An overview of ANA's nursing standards and related resources is available online:

http://nursingworld.org/MainMenuCategories/ThePracticeofProfessionalNursing/NursingStandards.aspx

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## Nursing's Social Policy Statement (ANA, 2010)

This foundational document describes the essence of the nursing profession that is both valued within society and is uniquely accountable to that society. The authority for nursing, as for other professions of trust, is based on social responsibility, which in turn derives from nursing's social contract wherein a mutually beneficial relationship exists between society and the nursing profession:

> "[S]ociety validates the existence of the profession through licensure, public affirmation, and legal and legislative parameters. Nursing's response is to provide care to all who are in need, regardless of their cultural, social, or economic standing." (pg. 5)

*Nursing's Social Policy Statement: The Essence of the Profession* describes the nursing profession as "particularly focused on establishing effective working relationships and collaborative efforts essential to accomplish its health-oriented mission." (pg. 7)

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## About ANA

The American Nurses Association (ANA) is the only full-service professional organization representing the interests of the nation's 3.1 million registered nurses through its constituent/state nurses associations and its organizational affiliates. The ANA advances the nursing profession by fostering high standards of nursing practice, promoting the rights of nurses in the workplace, projecting a positive and realistic view of nursing, and by lobbying the Congress and regulatory agencies on health care issues affecting nurses and the public.

This ANA publication—*ANA's Principles for Social Networking for the Nurse: Guidance for Registered Nurses*—reflects the thinking of the nursing profession on various issues and should be reviewed in conjunction with state board of nursing policies and practices. State law, rules, and regulations govern the practice of nursing, while this publication guides nurses in the application of their professional skills and responsibilities.

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